



## Do transformational leaders enhance their followers' daily work engagement?

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### ABSTRACT

This diary study investigated whether and how supervisors' leadership style influences followers' daily work engagement. On the basis of leadership theories and the job demands–resources model, we predicted that a transformational leadership style enhances employees' work engagement through the mediation of self-efficacy and optimism, on a day-to-day basis. Forty-two employees first filled in a general questionnaire, and then a diary survey over five consecutive workdays. The results of multilevel analyses offered partial support for our hypotheses. Daily transformational leadership related positively to employees' daily engagement, and day-levels of optimism fully mediated this relationship. However, daily self-efficacy did not act as a mediator. These findings expand theory and previous research by illuminating the role of transformational leaders in fostering employee work engagement.

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The concept of work engagement has gained momentum because of its predictive value for job performance (Bakker, 2009; Schaufeli & Salanova, 2007). In their recent review, Macey and Schneider (2008) listed various different definitions of work engagement. We follow Schaufeli and Bakker's (2004) operationalization, according to which work engagement is a positive, affective-motivational work-related *state* that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. *Vigor* refers to high levels of energy and mental resilience while working. *Dedication* refers to a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge. Finally, *absorption* is characterized by being fully concentrated and happily engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly and one has difficulties with detaching from work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004, 2010). We adopt this definition because we agree that work engagement is best conceived as the *experience* of the work activity, rather than a behavior that is driven by the connection with the work role (Bakker, Schaufeli, Leiter, & Taris, 2008). Furthermore, this definition encapsulates the concepts' state nature, meaning that engagement is not just a trait-like factor, but may vary even within the same person over time (Sonnentag, 2003; Sonnentag, Dormann, & Demerouti, 2010).

Previous studies have shown that job resources (e.g., autonomy; for reviews, see Bakker, 2009; Halbesleben, 2010) and personal resources (e.g., self-efficacy; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009a,b), due to their motivational potential, are important antecedents of work engagement. However, as far as we know, the role of the leader in fostering work engagement has received limited research attention. The central aim of the present study was to examine the relationship between transformational leadership and work engagement. We performed a diary study, in order to capture between- and within-person variations in the variables of interest. Specifically, we examined whether daily fluctuations in transformational leadership affect employees' daily work engagement, through employees' daily personal resources (self-efficacy and optimism).

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## 1. Daily fluctuations

The majority of previous (cross-sectional and longitudinal) studies treated work engagement as a relatively stable (trait-like) variable across time (Bakker, 2009; Macey & Schneider, 2008). As such, these studies have solely focused on between-person differences in work engagement. However, and in line with Schaufeli and Bakker's (2004) definition, work engagement may also be viewed as a state that may fluctuate within the same person. In this context, Sonnentag et al. (2010) suggested that generally engaged employees may have off-days, since "not all days are created equally". Indeed, diary studies have shown that daily fluctuations in (job and personal) resources are the most crucial predictors of day-level work engagement over and above employees' average (trait) levels of resources and engagement (Sonnentag, 2003; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009a). This implies that the simultaneous examination of the variables of interest at both the between-person (i.e., as enduring experiences, referred to as "traits") and the within-person level (i.e., as daily states) contributes significantly to our understanding of the psychological processes under study. This complementary approach was followed in the present diary study, where we investigate daily fluctuations of the variables of interest, while controlling for the respective traits.

Next to work engagement, we treat transformational leadership (i.e., consideration and support for followers; Bass, 1985), self-efficacy (i.e., people's expectations of being able to execute desired behaviors and impact their environment successfully; Bandura, 1977), and optimism (i.e., the expectation that positive things will happen; Scheier & Carver, 1992) as both traits and day-level factors. It is likely to expect that a generally transformational leader, who receives bad news at the beginning of the workday, will need to spend effort in order to deal with this new situation. This effort expenditure may lead to impaired attention and reduced help to his/her subordinates on that day, which is indicative of low transformational leadership. Consequently, subordinates who are generally self-efficacious and optimistic may feel less positive on that day, since they will not receive the leader support they are used to. In turn, this may affect their work engagement on that specific day. It is important to note that transformational leadership (Barling, Weber, & Kelloway, 1996), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) and optimism (Luthans, Avey, Avolio, Norman, & Combs, 2006; Luthans & Youssef, 2007) have shown to be malleable and sensitive to training and learning, implying that they may fluctuate within the same person depending on external stimuli. Additionally, previous studies have argued and shown that personal resources like optimism and self-efficacy may fluctuate from their dispositional baseline, even on the day-level (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Heuven, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2008; Xanthopoulou et al., 2009a).

The importance of examining the proposed psychological processes at the within-person level goes beyond the obvious methodological advantage of capturing day-to-day fluctuations. The added value of such an undertaking is above all theoretical. According to the homological views in theoretical modeling, constructs are expected to operate similarly across different levels of analysis (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). Therefore, support for homology of certain relationships across levels of analysis (at the between- and within-person level) adds to the parsimony and breadth of theories, while rejection of homology sets boundaries and indicates the need of theory refinement (Chen, Bliese, & Mathieu, 2005).

## 2. Leadership styles and work engagement

Bass (1985) differentiated between three broad leadership styles that vary from individual consideration and support for the employee (transformational style) to a proportional exchange between the leader and the employee (transactional style), or to no interest at all for the employee (*laissez-faire* style). We do not expect that the latter two leadership styles contribute to employees' work engagement substantially, because they lack motivational power and inspirational appeal. Indirect evidence for this contention comes from an experimental study by van Vugt, Jepson, Hart, and de Cremer (2004). Participants were randomly assigned to one of three groups and took part in three investment task trials. The authors manipulated the content of the messages sent by the leader to the group members to simulate either a transactional, transformational, or *laissez-faire* leadership style. After the task trials, individuals were asked whether they wanted to stay in the same group or join a different group for a subsequent task. The results suggested that participants were more likely to leave the group when they were in the condition with the transactional or the *laissez-faire* leader, in contrast with the transformational leader. When confronted with a transactional leader, group members were unhappy with the limited amount of control they had over the decision processes, while when confronted with a *laissez-faire* leader participants did have control, but they were not motivated to invest additional effort.

Furthermore, transactional leaders motivate only to get the work done and reward employees accordingly (Bass, 1985), but external rewards (particularly those that are given after finishing a specific task) have been consistently found to have a negative effect on intrinsic motivation (for a meta-analysis, see Deci, Koestner, & Ryan, 1999). Finally, several studies provide additional evidence for the destructiveness of the *laissez-faire* leadership style. Skogstad, Einarsen, Torsheim, Aasland, and Hetland (2007) found that this 'leaderless' leadership style was positively associated with job stressors such as role ambiguity, role conflict and conflict with co-workers, while Hauge, Skogstad, and Einarsen (2007) supported its positive relationship with bullying at work. To conclude, previous research favours our decision to focus on transformational leadership in relation to work engagement.

## 3. Transformational leadership and work engagement

Transformational leadership is defined as leadership behavior that transforms the norms and values of the employees, whereby the leader motivates the workers to perform beyond their own expectations (Yukl, 1989). This leadership style focuses on the enhancement of the followers' involvement with the goals of their organization (Bass, 1985). A central aspect of this leadership style is the inspiring vision of the supervisor (den Hartog, Koopman, & van Muijen, 1997).

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